

## **Rape Myth Acceptance at the US Air Force Academy: A Preliminary Look**

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In 2003, the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) came under the national spotlight due to its mishandling of approximately 142 alleged sexual assaults that occurred over a ten year time span (Fowler et al., 2003). Both internal and external investigations, including a panel chartered by Congress, revealed a lack of command involvement with sexual assault cases, significant underreporting due to cadet concerns regarding Honor Code violations<sup>1</sup>, and organizational socialization that stressed the importance of group loyalty over institutional core values (HQ USAF, 2003). The Air Force Academy's organizational culture, in particular, was cited as, "contributing to an environment that tolerates sexual misconduct" and its climate as marred with ongoing sexual harassment (Fowler et al., 2003:2; HQ USAF, 2003).

In reaction to these findings, Air Force and USAFA leaders acted swiftly to implement new sexual assault prevention and response programs to demonstrate zero tolerance for sexual assault and to facilitate greater openness toward reporting. New leadership also was put into place with the task of facilitating an organizational climate and culture that facilitated respectful behaviors among cadets, faculty, and staff. Even with these changes, however, sexual assault remains a serious challenge for the USAFA with incidence rates staying relatively steady over the past decade of new programs, new policies, and new leadership. This lack of change suggests that sexual assault, and the attitudes that facilitate this criminal behavior, may be entrenched in parts of the organizational structure and culture.

One way of analyzing aspects of the organization that facilitate or condone sexual assault is to measure rape myth acceptance among the population of interest. Lonsway and Fitzgerald

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<sup>1</sup> Although USAFA had an amnesty policy in place, many cadets were reluctant to report sexual assaults because most occurred while the offender and victim engaged in underage drinking. Cadets feared severe punishment for the drinking, perhaps even disenrollment, and did not think their leaders, nor their cadet peers, would consider all the circumstances surrounding the alleged crime (Fowler et al. 2003).

(1994) define rape myths as, “attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women” (p. 134). Rape myths remove culpability from the rapist and reframe the assault as the victim’s responsibility, whether due to poor decision-making, false accusations, or an inability to communicate or interpret intentions. Individuals with high rape myth acceptance are less likely to view rape as a pervasive criminal act and are more likely to frame it as a regrettable sexual encounter. Likewise, organizations with high rape myth acceptance rates among its populations are more likely to have rape supportive cultures (Edwards, Turchik, Dardis, Reynolds, & Gidycz, 2011). Because hypermasculinity and the numerical dominance of men are also risk factors for rape-supportive behaviors, military organizations with high rape myth acceptance rates may be especially prone to sexual assault (Turchik & Wilson, 2010). The Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale, or IRMA, is the most reliable scale available for measuring rape myth acceptance rates.

In this study, we explore rape myth acceptance rates among cadets at the USAFA as a way of capturing attitudinal trends that contribute to a culture that facilitates and/or condones sexual assault. Previous research on college students and rape myth acceptance suggests an overall decline in acceptance; however, this change is not across all measures, but is concentrated among those that frame the rape as involving physical force. Measures that involve alcohol or perceived subtle cues from the victim remain relatively steady in their acceptance (McMahon, 2010). Differences in acceptance rates between men and women has been noted in research on civilian and service academy students with men reporting higher acceptance rates in almost all cases and across most measures (McMahon, 2010; Rosenstein & Carroll, under review). However, women at the U.S. Naval Academy and at the U.S. Military Academy report

acceptance rates more closely aligned with their male peers than civilian women report with their male peers (Rosenstein & Carroll, funder review).

This research contributes to previous research on rape myth acceptance at the military service academies by analyzing differences in acceptance among men and women. It also examines rates of acceptance by class year, which is an especially valuable measure if acceptance rates are a learned aspect of the organizational culture. As the military service academy with the highest percentage of women and, consequently, with the highest use of sexual assault reporting services, the USAFA is an important case study on the embeddedness of rape-supportive attitudes and how these change over time.

## Method

### *Participants and Procedure*

Survey 1 was conducted during the week of February 15, 2015 with all four class years (those graduating in 2015-2018) of cadets. Cadets in the freshman class (class year 2018) had been in the academy environment for just over 7 months. This survey was made available electronically for cadets to complete over the course of 4 days during a dedicated survey assessment time (that included other possible surveys as well). While the survey was anonymous, each participant indicated to which squadron he or she belonged. This information was given to squadron leadership who offered a leave pass for 70% or better participation, although this could be for completing any or all of the various surveys offered. Of the 2,111 completed surveys 243 (11.5%) were omitted due to excessive missing data or for incorrect completion of a reliability item. Our final sample included 1,868 cadets, with 1,345 men (72%) and 523 women (28%).

Survey 2 was conducted with the class of 2019 only, on the third day after their arrival to USAFA in July of 2015. They had been given one briefing the day prior to this survey about sexual assault to include definitions of unwanted sexual contact, harassment, rape, etc., and an explanation of assault reporting procedures and helping agencies. The survey was administered during a dedicated survey completion time via paper and pencil in a large auditorium. Surveys were disseminated and returned in folders to maintain privacy. Cadets were randomly given the short form of either the 2011 revised IRMA scale or the original version of the IRMA (Payne, Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1999). Only results from the revised measure are reported here. Of the 581 completed surveys, 24 (4.1%) were omitted, resulting in a sample size of 557 (425 men and 132 women, or 76.3% and 23.7% of the sample, respectively).

### *Measures*

Participants completed the revised version of The Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale – Short form (IRMA; McMahon and Farmer, 2011), an update of the 1999 version of the IRMA (Payne, Lonsway & Fitzgerald)<sup>2</sup>. This is a 22-item scale that includes statements about a woman or man's role in a sexual situation that may lead to assault. This form only addresses women as the victims of assault and men as the perpetrators. Participants indicate how much they agree with each statement on a 5 point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. For survey 2 respondents used a 1 to 6 scale. For analyses, the percentage of respondents who agreed (either "Strongly agree" or "Agree" on the 1 to 5 scale, or "Moderately Agree" or "Strongly agree" on the 1 to 6 scale). The scale consists of four subscales, including "She asked for it" (6 items), "He didn't mean to" (6 items), "It wasn't really rape" (5 items), and "she lied" (5 items).

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<sup>2</sup> Much of the wording was changed in the revised IRMA to reflect terms used by college-aged men and women based on focus groups with this population. Additional effort were made to include items addressing more subtle rape myths.

*Hypotheses*

1. Overall, men would have higher rates of rape myth acceptance than women. This would hold true for each of the rape myths evaluated separately, as well as for the number of rape myths that men versus women accepted. We expected to see this pattern among both of our samples.
2. There would be decreasing agreement with rape myths, on average, the longer that cadets had been at USAFA (that is, the rates would be higher for freshman, then decrease for each successive class year). Seniors would have the lowest rates of rape myth acceptance.
3. Cadets' responses would be similar to cadets and midshipmen from USMA and USNA. Cadets' would have a higher overall level of agreement with rape myths than their civilian counterparts.

**Results**

*Study 1: All class years*

Results from Study 1 are displayed in Table 1, which presents the percentage of cadets from all four class years who agree with each rape myth, from the highest level of agreement (27.7%) to the lowest (0.5%). Among men the highest level of agreement was 32%, and among women it was 29.9% (on two items).

To determine if observed differences between men and women were statistically significant, chi-square analyses were conducted for each rape myth. To control for family-wise error, a Bonferroni correction was conducted (for alpha = .05 the corrected *p* value was .05/22 =.0023). Consistent with hypothesis 1, men had significantly higher rates of agreement than women on 12 of the 22 rape myths. The overall rate of acceptance was below 10% on seven of

the remaining 10 items, making significant differences between men and women less likely.

There were no items on which women had higher levels of agreement than men.

The relative ordering of acceptance among men, using the average ordinal value of the four subscales, indicates that they have the highest acceptance for the “She lied” subscale (such as “girls who are caught cheating on their boyfriends sometimes claim it was rape”). This is followed by the “He didn’t mean to” subscale, “She asked for it,” and finally “It wasn’t really rape.” The ordering for women’s responses was similar: “He didn’t mean to,” followed closely by “She lied,” then “She asked for it” and “It wasn’t really rape.” Significantly more men than women endorsed 4 or more myths (43.7% vs. 25.0%, respectively) and fewer men than women endorsed no myths at all (21.6% to 36.3%, respectively);  $X^2 (1, N=1868) = 67.34, p < .0001$ , Cramer’s V = .189.

Next we compared the level of rape myth acceptance between class years. A chi-square analysis with a Bonferroni correction resulted in significant differences for 5 of the rape myth items. Further post-hoc analyses were conducted on these items to determine which class years were significantly different from the others. To do so, adjusted residual values for each of these items and class year were squared, yielding Z score values from which corresponding  $p$  values could be determined (Beasley, & Schumacker, 1995; Garcia-Perez, & Nunez, 2003). Results are presented in Table 3. In all cases, the senior class (2015) had lower rates of rape myth acceptance than the other three class years. For two of the myths (both from the “She asked for it” subscale), those from the junior (2016) class year had higher rates of acceptance. For three of the myths those from the freshman (2018) class had higher rates of acceptance. All of these were from the “He didn’t mean to” subscale.

*Study 2: Incoming freshmen*

Results from Study 2 are displayed in Table 2, which presents the percentage of cadets from the incoming freshman class of 2019 who agree with each rape myth, from the highest level of agreement (47.7%) to the lowest (0.1%). Among men the highest level of agreement was 49.2%, and among women it was 43.1%. There were only two items on which men and women's rates of agreement differed significantly. Additionally and surprisingly, there were two items that had higher rates of agreement among women than among men (although these differences were not statistically significant).

The relative ordering of acceptance among men and women, using the average ordinal value of the four subscales, was identical. They have the highest acceptance for the "She lied" subscale, followed by the "He didn't mean to" subscale, "She asked for it," and "It wasn't really rape." There was no significant difference between men and women in the percentage that endorsed 4 or more myths (31.4% of men vs. 24.3% of women) or that endorsed no myths at all (16.9% of men, and 24.2% of women);  $X^2 (1, N=557) = 4.67, p=.097$ .

A comparison of the results from the two studies merits caution. With regard to gender differences, in Study 2 it took a difference of 13% to reach statistical significance, whereas in Study 1 a difference of 5.5% between the men's and women's responses was statistically significant (likely due in part to the larger sample size). In Study 2, there was this level of difference on 10 of the 22 Rape Myth items.

#### *Comparison with college student population*

McMahon (2010) collected rape myth acceptance data from incoming undergraduate students using 19 items from the revised IRMA. The overall mean in McMahon's sample was

2.51 (SD = .56), while the overall mean among our Study 1<sup>3</sup> participants was 2.14 (SD = .50).

Our sample was different in that it was composed of 72% male and 28% female respondents, who had been at the Academy for 7 months to 43 months. McMahon's sample was 47.3% male (mean = 2.68; SD=.55) and 53.4% female (mean=2.36; SD=.52). While it is difficult to draw firm conclusions, these results are promising in that they may indicate that rape myth acceptance is generally lower at USAFA than among a civilian college population, and/or that the rates of rape myth acceptance decline over the course of one's collegiate career.

#### *Comparison with other Military Service Academies*

Our analytic approach paralleled that of Rosenstein and Carroll (under review) who analyzed rape myth acceptance at USNA and USMA. Direct comparisons with their results were not possible as they used the 1999 version of the IRMA (whereas we used the 2011 revision), and collected data from incoming freshmen only. However, a broad comparison of results from our survey with incoming freshmen (Study 2) show some similar patterns to their results; levels of agreement vary widely, from little agreement with "overt" rape myths ("if the accused rapist doesn't have a weapon you really can't call it rape") to significant agreement with more subtle myths ("Guys don't usually intend to force sex on a girl, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away"). As with their results, we also found that men tend to have higher levels of agreement than women, and agree with more myths overall (although this last finding did not reach significance in our study).

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<sup>3</sup> The mean for Study 1 was calculated using only the 19 items used by McMahon to allow for direct comparison. This was on a 1-5 Likert scale, with higher scores indicating higher levels of rape myth agreement.

## Discussion

The gender differences found in Study 1 aligned with our hypotheses, that men generally accept rape myths at higher rates than do women. The relative lack of these gender differences in Study 2 was of some surprise. This may be a statistical artifact (due to a smaller sample size), but may also reflect a genuine lack of differences in views between incoming men and women. The latter conclusion would suggest differential socialization effects for men versus women. Given our skewed proportion of men to women, and the highly masculine military environment, it is surprising that our overall level of rape myth acceptance is lower than a civilian sample.

There are interesting implications of our findings regarding class year differences. That seniors (in their final semester) have lower rates of rape myth acceptance may be attributable to their pending transition into the operational military as commissioned officers. This transition is arguably a more impactful one for those leaving military service academies than for their civilian counterparts graduating from universities. According to emerging adulthood theory (Arnett, 2000, 2007), the transition from adolescence to adulthood is a gradual process that entails significant identity exploration, and is characterized by a relative lack of significant responsibilities and commitments and a focus on oneself (versus others), among other traits. While criteria for reaching adulthood is somewhat subjective, there is some agreement that it requires one to become self-reliant (financially and with significant life decisions), take on more responsibility for others (such as with a partner, family, or at work), and go through significant role transitions (such as finishing one's education, purchasing a home, getting married, or beginning a career; Nelson, 2007). The structure of the military service academies, to include the US Air Force Academy, limits the ability of cadets to reach these milestones in the same way as their civilian counterparts. During their time at the Academy cadets are not allowed to be

married or have any dependents, hold employment outside of their military jobs, or keep a home or apartment in the local area. For cadets, their transition to adulthood is anything but gradual. Cadets attain their academic degree, commission as military officers, and are allowed to marry,<sup>4</sup> all within a day of graduation. By that time cadets have been assigned a career field (although they can submit a list of preferred careers) and have received their first duty assignment and location, to which they must report after a 60-day leave period. The realization that they will soon take on significant responsibility that could require them to make important decisions about situations like those in the IRMA may prompt these cadets to be more reflective about their responses. If this interpretation is accurate, it suggests that we should place more emphasis on creating the conditions necessary for their learning and acceptance of the knowledge, skills and attitudes targeted by sexual assault prevention programming. This might entail addressing the roles and responsibilities inherent in a professional identity, to include recognizing the behaviors by their subordinates that may lead to sexual harassment and/or assault. Further data collection is planned for next spring that will shed light on the longitudinal nature of these findings, and may provide an opportunity to test this interpretation.

The junior class of cadets had slightly higher agreement with two rape myths from the “She asked for it” subscale<sup>5</sup>. Among the freshmen cadets in Study 1 there was higher agreement with three items from the “He didn’t mean to” subscale than for the other 3 class years. Of note, two of these items were also the most highly endorsed by the *incoming* class of freshmen. suggesting that these attitudes are held prior to any of the socializing effects of the Academy experience. These results highlight the importance of tailored intervention for subgroups of the

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<sup>4</sup> which they do, at rates equal to or higher than their civilian counterparts, in a far shorter span of time; McCone & O'Donnell, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> These items were “If a girl is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of hand,” and “When girls go to parties wearing slutty clothes, they are asking for trouble.”

cadet population to more directly address specific attitudes or beliefs more strongly held by that subgroup. This approach is being used with different groups based on gender (Foubert, 2000, Rau et al., 2011), and may also be beneficial for other groups at elevated risk (such as male athletes and fraternity members).

In conclusion, the studies discussed here are an initial, preliminary effort to assess the social climate among cadets at the U.S. Air Force Academy as it relates to the potential for sexist behavior, harassment and assault. The results suggest that cadets may accept rape myths to a lesser extent than their civilian counterparts, but be similar to their peers at other military service academies. Further longitudinal research is planned to elucidate the developmental nature of these beliefs over the 4 year span of their academy career.

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Table 1

*Percent of USAFA Cadets Overall and by Gender Who Endorsed Each Rape Myth*

<b>Item</b>	<b>Overall</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>
Girls who are caught cheating on their boyfriends sometimes claim it was rape.	27.7	32*	16.6
If a girl acts like a slut, eventually she is going to get into trouble.	27	29.6*	20
If a guy is drunk, he might rape someone unintentionally.	26.4	27.2 <sup>ns</sup>	24.4
Guys don't usually intend to force sex on a girl, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away.	26.3	27.9*	22.2
If a girl initiates kissing or hooking up, she should not be surprised if a guy assumes she wants to have sex.	26	29.9*	15.8
A lot of times, girls who say they were raped agreed to have sex and then regret it.	26	29.9*	16.1
When guys rape, it is usually because of their strong desire for sex.	23.3	25.5*	17.5
A lot of times, girls who say they were raped often led the guy on and then had regrets.	23	26.2*	14.3
Rape accusations are often used as a way of getting back at guys.	20	23.1*	11.7
A lot of times, girls who claim they were raped have emotional problems.	20	21.7*	15.3
If a girl is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of hand.	19.4	20.4 <sup>ns</sup>	17.1
If a girl doesn't say "no" she can't claim rape.	17.9	20.2*	11.7

If both people are drunk, it can't be rape. 17.1 19.7\* 10.2

<b><i>Item</i></b>	<b><i>Overall</i></b>	<b><i>Men</i></b>	<b><i>Women</i></b>
When girls go to parties wearing slutty clothes, they are asking for trouble.	15.5	17.8*	9.8
Rape happens when a guy's sex drive goes out of control.	11.5	12.3 ns	9.3
It shouldn't be considered rape if a guy is drunk and didn't realize what he was doing.	7.6	8.0 ns	6.5
When girls get raped, it's often because the way they said "no" was unclear.	6.3	6.5 ns	5.6
If a girl doesn't physically resist sex—even if protesting verbally—it can't be considered rape.	3.4	3.7 ns	2.6
If a girl goes to a room alone with a guy at a party, it is her own fault if she is raped.	2.7	2.9 ns	2.6
If a girl doesn't physically fight back, you can't really say it was rape.	1.4	1.5 ns	1.1
A rape probably doesn't happen if a girl doesn't have any bruises or marks.	0.7	0.8 ns	0.6
If the accused "rapist" doesn't have a weapon, you really can't call it rape.	0.5	0.4 ns	0.4

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*Note:* \* Indicates significant differences between men's and women's agreement percentages at p<.05. ns Indicates a non-significant difference at p<.05.

Table 2

*Percent of Entering Freshmen Cadets Overall and by Gender Who Endorsed Each Rape Myth*

<b>Item</b>	<b>Overall</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>
When guys rape, it is usually because of their strong desire for sex.	47.7	49.2 <sup>ns</sup>	43.1
Guys don't usually intend to force sex on a girl, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away.	30.0	31.3*	18.3
Girls who are caught cheating on their boyfriends sometimes claim it was rape.	27.0	28.4 <sup>ns</sup>	22.5
If a girl acts like a slut, eventually she is going to get into trouble.	24.7	26.3 <sup>ns</sup>	19.7
If a girl initiates kissing or hooking up, she should not be surprised if a guy assumes she wants to have sex	23.9	26.1 <sup>ns</sup>	16.7
Rape happens when a guy's sex drive goes out of control.	23.6	26.5 <sup>ns</sup>	14.5
Rape accusations are often used as a way of getting back at guys.	23.6	25.9 <sup>ns</sup>	16.3
A lot of times, girls who say they were raped agreed to have sex and then regret it.	23.0	26.2*	13.0
A lot of times, girls who claim they were raped have emotional problems.	22.2	21.0 <sup>ns</sup>	26.6
If a guy is drunk, he might rape someone unintentionally.	20.1	21.0 <sup>ns</sup>	17.1
A lot of times, girls who say they were raped often led the guy on and then had regrets.	14.3	14.9 <sup>ns</sup>	12.4
If both people are drunk, it can't be rape.	12.4	14.1 <sup>ns</sup>	6.9

If a girl doesn't say "no" she can't claim rape. 12.0 12.9<sup>ns</sup> 9.1

<b>Item</b>	<b>Overall</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>
When girls go to parties wearing slutty clothes, they are asking for trouble.	10.1	11.3 <sup>ns</sup>	6.1
When girls get raped, it's often because the way they said "no" was unclear.	8.4	8.6 <sup>ns</sup>	7.7
If a girl is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of hand	7.5	8.3 <sup>ns</sup>	5.3
If a girl goes to a room alone with a guy at a party, it is her own fault if she is raped.	4.7	5.4 <sup>ns</sup>	2.2
If a girl doesn't physically resist sex—even if protesting verbally—it can't be considered rape.	3.2	3.3 <sup>ns</sup>	3.0
It shouldn't be considered rape if a guy is drunk and didn't realize what he was doing.	2.7	2.8 <sup>ns</sup>	2.3
If a girl doesn't physically fight back, you can't really say it was rape.	1.0	1.2 <sup>ns</sup>	0.7
A rape probably doesn't happen if a girl doesn't have any bruises or marks.	0.5	0.2 <sup>ns</sup>	1.5
If the accused "rapist" doesn't have a weapon, you really can't call it rape.	0.1	0.2 <sup>ns</sup>	0.0

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*Note:* \* Indicates significant differences between men's and women's agreement percentages at p<.05. <sup>ns</sup> Indicates a non-significant difference at p<.05.

Table 3

*Percent of Cadets by Class Year Who Endorsed Each Rape Myth*

<i>Item</i>	<i>Class</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>2018</i>	<i>2017</i>	<i>2016</i>	<i>2015</i>
If a girl is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of hand			19.8	21.1	22.9*	13.8*
When girls go to parties wearing slutty clothes, they are asking for trouble.			13.9	17.6	20.2*	11.0*
When guys rape, it is usually because of their strong desire for sex			27.3*	24.9	21.1	17.8*
Guys don't usually intend to force sex on a girl, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away			30.0*	27.6	26.6	19.2*
If a guy is drunk, he might rape someone unintentionally			30.4*	26	28.6	19.5*

*Note:* \* Indicates a significant difference between that class year and others for that item at p<.05. Only items for which there were significant differences are presented here.